

The BACI

On the verandah's floor, or on the living room's floor, the host has laid out multi-colored straw mats (the aristocracy and well-to-do of Vientiane use rugs) on which you sit, barefooted or socked, not crosslegged, but with both legs tucked to one side, rather uncomfortably paralyzing for awhile, but it is the way it should be done.

At arm's length in front of you is a phakuan, an elaborate bouquet of champa and other flowers sticking out from a cone made out of banana leaves, whose base rests on a silver, intricately carved urn (a khan), which in turn rests on a broad, tin tray surrounded with bottles of lao-lao (rice wine), boiled chicken, kahnom (cakes), bananas, hard-boiled eggs, kaotom (steamed rice with a slice of banana all wrapped in small packages of banana leaves). It is the loving handiwork of the host's mother, or his wife, assisted by other elderly female neighbors.



You will note that there are thin white cotton strings dangling limply from the flowers. There are also quite a number of people sitting around you and the phakuan in a manner that puts you in the center of things, for you are the celebrant. There is murmur of small talk, perhaps about how such a good-looking person can be so young, or perhaps about the lost look in your eyes.

The mohpohn arrive, an elderly man, a white silk-like scarf worn like a sash across his front. He sits on the opposite side of the phakuan, facing you. The mohpohn is no ordinary man of the village; he has spent quite a number of his years as a monk and is therefore highly respected for his piety, his wisdom, his unblemished reputation. He lights the finger-thin candles peeking among the champa blossoms, clears his throat, joins his hands in prayer, and in a fast, solemn monologue, addresses the gods in a mixture of Pali and Lao:

"Sakke who dwells in the paradise of the 16 regions;

Kame who dwells in the kamaphob,

Charoupe who dwells in the Roupaphob and in the
divine spheres,

Khirisi who dwells in the inanimate things, the
mountains and the rivers,

You, divinities of the mountains and the rivers,
be favorable to us; listen all of you;

Silent ones, lend a kindly ear to the invitation
which I send to you;

Come and gather the gifts offered to you on this day."

As celebrant, you touch 3 or 4 fingers of one extended hand to the rim of the khan as the prayers are chanted, while the others join their hands in prayer. The invitation is now extended to your soul, or souls, for you have 32 of them (one each for every part of your body) which are "vagabond in nature", ever eager to break away and roam the fields:

"Come back, oh soul, come along the path which
has been cleaned and is now open to you;

Come home;

Wade through the river if it only comes up to
your chest;

Swim if the river is deep;

When you arrive at the ray, don't hide in the huts;

When you come up to the tree stump, do not rest your head
on it.

Do not fear when you come near.

Have no fear of ghosts or geniuses.

Come, oh soul, if you have eaten with the evil spirits,
vomit it,

If you have been chewing with the evil spirits,
spit it out

You must come back on an empty stomach, and eat rice with
your uncle, and eat fish with your ancestors."

If the prayers don't beckon them back, the flowers and the food are present to tempt them right back into your innards. When these souls are nowsafely tucked in, the blessings of the mohpohn are pronounced over you, specifically for the occasion for which the baci is being performed. Thus, if you're a newcomer there is a wish that no calamity befall you while in Laos if you've just recovered from sickness, may you "be as strong as the antlers of a stag, as the jaws of a wild boar, as the tusks of an elephant"; if the occasion is marriage, "may you have a dozen children, an obedient wife..."The crowd agrees with a distinct "Sa!" (so be it).

Join your hands in thanks; then raise your left hand as if to shield your left cheek, extend your right upon which an egg or a chicken leg, and a flower or a piece of cake, are placed; the mohpohn reaches to tie the white strings around your wrists, while murmuring more blessings and wishes. You will feel the touch of many fingers on your elbow, your thigh, back, arm, leg, as those sitting closest to you partake of the blessings by touch. The touch is at the same time their gesture with which they invoke the same blessings on you. If you will look back, you will note that everybody is touching each other in the same manner, so that the blessings are infused into one and all.

The host now takes your wrists, twines his strings around it, says his blessings, knots the string, pushes and rubs it into your pulse (to imbue the blessings with more efficacy and strength) and finally blows onto your wrists (to signify he's through). Soon everybody is tying the white strings around both your wrists, the giggling ripples because some of the wishes are asking too much, jiggers of the lao-lao are being passed around, most of them coming your way. Lunch follows. Although performed by Buddhists, the baci is not a Buddhist religious ceremony; it predates Buddhism's arrival in the kingdom and is the Lao's most unique way of expressing his good will, sincere in its simplicity, warm in its blessings, generous in its gifts. It is the all-purpose ceremony which greets the newborn body, sets him off on a journey, welcomes his return, honors his achievements, weds him to his wife, bids him goodbye, celebrates his escape from injury, his triumph over sickness.

It is traditional to keep those strings around your wrists for 3 days, your protection against the hordes of evil spirits that lurk in the forests and along the pathways, not only of Laos, but of life itself.

The cotton thread, although fragile and soft and common, is a symbol of continuity and permanence because centuries of Lao ancestors have been spinning it and it is still being spun under many village homes where time has not moved much through the seasons. It is white, the Lao color for warmth and honesty and peace.



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The Baci

by

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The *baci* is the Laotian ceremony *par excellence*, the one with which this kind people expresses its *joie de vivre* and warmheartedness.

Whether magnificent or modest, grave or familiar but always ardent and sincere, the *baci* is an expression of welcome which greets the official on his tour of duty as well as any traveller on his way.

A *baci* is celebrated to wish both good health and long life to a new born child « whose eyes have just open to the light », to the young mother at the end of her confinement, or to a sick person on her way to recovery, to a traveller about to undertake a long journey or who is just returning home. There are New Year *bacis*, wedding *bacis*, *bacis* offered to high officials passing through the country, to friends met again after a long separation or to an official upon whom honours have been bestowed; *bacis* of welcome or *bon voyage*, of happiness and prosperity.

A generous ceremony if ever there was one, where everyone can find the wishes most agreeable to one and from which everyone comes out with added luster; at the end of his *baci* the common ox has grown into a *usuphalat* (1) and a snake into a *nag* (2).

Let us add besides, that the *baci* offers young people an excellent opportunity for acquiring a foretaste of marriage under the kindly supervision of the mothers. It is a smile to life, a forgiveness of trespasses and the unshakable confidence in the supreme powers of the gods and the Buddha.

Baci is a pompous and kingly term. It is also commonly called *sukhuan*.

Sukhuan means both calling and welcoming the soul, for the soul is of a roving nature and is only too glad to leave one's body. The following story is told:

« Two travellers walked across a forest. At the end of the

(1) "Great Bull".

(2) *Nāg* or *Nāga*, great sea Serpent in Indian mythology.

TH
day's march, one of them feeling asleep. A short while later, he woke out of his friend's head... Sloping trees, followed the bank of the river and there came back to its station the sleeper awoke and said: « Ah, I have walked in forests and bathed in

The other one had no difficulty between what he had seen and what he had thought. And the thought occurred to him that his soul is fond of assuming various

Indeed, the soul loves to roam about, kept or recalled home as often as it haunts unwholesome places or to

We should, it is said, offer « a treat » to that problem child with its sicknesses or misfortunes — often

Then comes the choosing of

The households have been chosen. They consist of a tray covered with cotton threads which are dressed with cupped flowers. On the top, as a symbol of happiness, flowers, proudly stuck on little

Moreover, the *phakuan* contains candles and cotton threads.

The parents then arrive, sons and daughters, *phakuan*s, others bringing money.

Thus spread over a red carpet, the air with all the lovely perfume of the celebrant. The ceremony is usually performed by an old man, dressed in white, and of *thit* or *chane* (2) rank.

Here he comes, sits in the place of guest of honour. The candles are lit, a light mist of perfume and incense addresses the guardians gods.

INVOCATION

« Sakké who dwells in the East
« Kamé who dwells in the West

(1) 'Tray' or 'Repast for the soul'.
(2) Rank of unfrocked monks.

Baci

ABHAY.
of Education.

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day's march, one of them feeling tired, decided to lay down and fell asleep. A short while later, his companion saw a cricket coming out of his friend's head... Slowly the insect crawled among the trees, followed the bank of the river nearby, and after hopping here and there came back to its starting point. At that moment the sleeper awoke and said: « Ah, what a sleep and what a dream! I walked in forests and bathed in rivers... »

The other one had no difficulty in establishing the relation between what he had seen and what he was told by his companion. And the thought occurred to him that when leaving the body, the soul is fond of assuming various animal forms... »

Indeed, the soul loves to roam about so much that it must be kept or recalled home as often as possible, since it is liable to haunt unwholesome places or to be led astray by evil companions.

We should, it is said, offer once a month at least, a *sukhuan*, a « treat » to that problem child whose absence is at the origin of our sicknesses or misfortunes — often both!

..

Then comes the choosing of the lucky day and hour.

The households have been preparing a *phakuan* (1), which consist of a tray covered with 6 bowls and of *khans* (smaller trays) which are dressed with cupped banana leaves filled with flowers. On the top, as a symbol of happiness, a bigger bouquet of champa flowers, proudly stuck on little wooden sticks.

Moreover, the *phakuan* contains alcohol, eggs, cakes, rice, silver, candles and cotton threads.

The parents then arrive, some bringing along similar or smaller *phakuans*, others bringing modest cups filled with rice and flowers.

Thus spread over a red carpet, the multicolored *phakuans*, fill the air with all the lovely perfumes of Laos, while awaiting the celebrant. The ceremony is usually performed by a white-haired old man, dressed in white, and preferably, by an unfrocked monk of *thil* or *chane* (2) rank.

Here he comes, sits in the appropriate place, *i. e.*, facing the guest of honour. The candles and incense sticks are lit and while a light mist of perfume and incense arise, the venerable old man addresses the guardians gods.

INVOCATION TO DIVINITIES

« *Sakké who dwells in the Paradise of the sixteen regions;*
« *Kamé who dwells in the Kamaphob,*

(1) 'Tray' or 'Repast for the soul'.

(2) Rank of unfrocked monks.

« Charoupé who dwells in the Roupaphob and in the divine spheres,
 « Khirisi who dwells in inanimate things, the mountains and
 the rivers,
 « Atlarikhé who dwells in the air ;

.....
 « You, divinities of the mountains and the rivers, be favorable to us ;
 « Listen all of you ;
 « Silent ones, lend a kindly ear to the invitation which I send you ;
 « Come and gather the gifts offered to you on this day ».

Then:

CALLING THE SOUL

« This is a very propitious day, a very appropriate one, the day
 when the victorious King re-enters his Palace!

« This is the day we have chosen to put on this tray hard boiled
 eggs, potatoes, tubers, coco-nuts, chicken legs. All these choice morsels
 together with some good bottles of alcohol, apart from other delicious
 dishes!

« The time is propitious and we have invited the great scholar
 to sit before this tray and to call the soul »!

He then calls for the soul, for the soul drown in the river or
 lost in the fog, for the soul fallen into a hole or for the stray
 souls wandering in rivers, streams, ponds or lakes, and among
 the frogs...

« Come back, oh soul, come along the path which has been cleaned
 and is now open to you ;

« Come home ;

« Wade through the river if it only comes up to your chest ;

« Swim if the river is deep ;

« When you arrive at the ray, don't hide in the huts ;

« When you come up to the tree stump, do not rest your head on it.

« Do not fear when you come near ;

« Have no fear of ghosts or geniuses.

« Come, oh soul, if you have eaten with the Phis, vomit it,

« If you have been chewing with the Phis, spit it out ;

« You must come back on an empty stomach, and eat rice with
 your uncle, and eat fish with your ancestors! »

According to tradition, each of the thirty-two parts of our body
 has a soul. The celebrant does not forget this. He then calls the
 soul belonging to the head to return from the Akalita Heavens,
 should it have gone there; he calls for the soul of the legs which
 might have gone to the Hongsa and the Hos; calling for the souls
 which might have gone over to the little village of never ending

dew, where the cock do not crow
 shine (1).

« Come back this day, oh soul
 uninhabited village, where live the
 the goddesses with two knots of hair
 « Do not linger on the way, nei

sins;

« Come home, to your home m
 thick hay and of which the foundatio
 work has been pulled by the might

« Come back to this stately ab
 anything, where you shall not be
 parents, where all will love you as
 stone;

« Come back, stand before the
 on! ».

When these incantations an
 believed that the divinities are
 that all the souls have gone b
 formula is then recited.

Wis

« Be as strong as the antlers of
 as the tusks of an elephant!

« May your life last a thousan
 and in every kind, elephants, horse

« Should you suffer with fever

« If you are a servant, may y
 a khun makes it a phagna, and a

« May you be all-powerful l

« May everything yield before

.....
 « May you have long life, he

The audience which had rema
 at the forehead, now acquiesce b

Then someone comes to faster
 wrist. He, in turns, does the
 sukhuon is offered. Each in tu

The sukhuon always extends

(1) Metaphors for the Kingdom of D

(2) Short for 'sathou' ("So be it!").

(3) Night vigil or court of love.

*the Roupaphob and in the divine spheres,
animale things, the mountains and
the rivers,
the air;*

mountains and the rivers, be favorable to us;

*hear to the invitation which I send you;
offered to you on this day ».*

THE SOUL

*day, a very appropriate one, the day
his Palace!*

*chosen to put on this tray hard boiled
chicken legs. All these choice morsels
of alcohol, apart from other delicious*

*and we have invited the great scholar
all the soul »!*

*for the soul drown in the river or
fallen into a hole or for the stray
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it only comes up to your chest;

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dew, where the cock do not crow and where the sun does not shine (1).

« Come back this day, oh soul who has gone to a new birth in the uninhabited village, where live the twin-tails snakes, and where reign the goddesses with two knots of hair;

« Do not linger on the way, neither with the Phis or in the mountains;

« Come home, to your home made of smooth planks, covered with thick hay and of which the foundation piles and the timber of its framework has been pulled by the mighty elephants;

« Come back to this stately abode where you shall not be short of anything, where you shall not be ill-treated either by your uncles or parents, where all will love you as gold and cherish you as a precious stone;

« Come back, stand before the phakuan and slay home from now on! ».

When these incantations and prayers have been said, it is believed that the divinities are presiding over the ceremony and that all the souls have gone back into the body. The wishes formula is then recited.

WISHES

« Be as strong as the antlers of a stag, as the jaws of a wild bear or as the tusks of an elephant!

« May your life last a thousand years, may your riches be abundant in every kind, elephants, horses, victuals and wealth!

« Should you suffer with fever, may it disappear!

« If you are a servant, may you be free, for a sukhuuan offered to a khun makes it a phagna, and a phagna turns it into a king!

« May you be all-powerful the world over!

« May everything yield before you and may you be free from want!

« May you have long life, health, happiness and strength! »

..

The audience which had remained silent and with palms together at the forehead, now acquiesce by murmuring: « *sa!* » (2).

Then someone comes to fasten a cotton thread to the celebrant's wrist. He, in turns, does the same to the person to whom the *sukhuuan* is offered. Each in turn receives a lucky thread.

The *sukhuuan* always extends into a *ngan* (3).

(1) Metaphors for the Kingdom of Death.

(2) Short for 'sathou!' ("So be it!").

(3) Night vigil or court of love.